

# Home Like

Nabil Kashyap

Neighboring Systems 2019



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A dry fountain is what I remember, a giant rust lotus in a pale basin drained for fall. I remember leafless shrubs, broad arc of low granite steps above which the letters, very large, *OLEV*. Hovering, clinging maybe. Here I was, I recognized myself in this place but what was the story? Had I been here before? Hadn't I? It was the feeling of having been but then who in the region could say they had not, in some sense, taken in this place, these letters. I said to myself, come back—I had at that moment to get somewhere else—but come back here.

I must have been in Philadelphia at least three years, during which time not once had I needed to walk the parkway in this direction, Fairmount to Center City. Little interest in Robert Indiana and apart from subway transfers and jury summons, little to engage me in this part of the city.

Except maybe the Christmas Village the year it featured Jesus in burlap robe rapping, that was engaging. Seasonal, memorable, of a moment. Terms which could have as easily described Indiana's original design, commissioned first for a MOMA holiday card. Had I ever even crossed the sculpture from the correct approach, the *LOVE* side of Love Park? Iconic, they say. I think of a dirigible ever tugging up, up toward generalization, against which our particulars ballast and knot, how the lines still fray. Feels like every scrap of culture must balloon toward icon, every moment a monument, as if that were the point, in this case a monument to street culture and to shopping local and to the monotony of Christian appropriation.

I did come back, maybe a year had passed, but the place was different. Safety orange, cyclone fencing, heavy machinery. The moment I returned to figure out whether I'd been here in the first place: Poof. I found instead bold, aspirational signage and tarpaulin future vistas bannering a more or less empty pit. It was a shame. Longest I have resided anywhere since high school and I am continually struck by how little sense I am able to make of this city. I comb the internet of course, can call up bite-sized histories to do with disparate pockets on the map. The rivers, the trees, the industries, the iniquities—can peck out a little of each. But I cannot say I get it, not alien exactly, nor does it feel like home. Perhaps why at the sight of this closure I was unaccountably crushed. I missed my chance. To have lost the possibility—however remote, however unappetizing—of engaging the square of concrete and landscaping, that millions of visitors had for decades come to associate with the sense of this place. It would reopen of course but it could not be the same, could it?

The letters are very red. I do not even have to say because the red outruns description. The red is a flat red unless you look askance at which point: depth. A solid green depth to the letters, as if the letters have traveled to meet you, thickly, inexorably, the letters are coming towards you. These letters are many places but they are here. Came by way of procession after a period of enclosure during the remodel. This procession included several stops along the route for convenience, these letters which are everywhere were on this day, along this procession, somehow nearer. You could touch them in your neighborhood, wherever you were, wherever you were from, you could reach out for an artifact of *LOVE*'s nearness and then you would have it in your phone.

Exhaustive minor variations on a scene captured at arms length by mobile miracles with cameras that look both ways at once. Maybe there is a genealogy to this image regimen. Before this, vectors caught in drafters' CAD files. And before that, hand waving of mid-century urbanists enchanting city council. Whatever depictions, whatever plans, now tabled, now greenlighted, now souring in a lost room's last flat file cabinet. Where others have bounded the coordinates of our perception ahead of time, we are saved the hassle. I stand in two-point perspective as the surfaces play out in front of me, the range and degrees of freedom of that perspective calculated how long before. Texture and weight and specificity suck out from under my body, from under any physical bodies taking space, utopic, I am left no place or am a happy place left.

In an essay about *locus amoenus*, Brian Blancheld writes: "The kind of place where all looking is onlooking." This is the green depth folded into any pasture, behind, beneath, any pastoral. A green reproducible persistence, nearby but other than and parallel to anyone's experience.

This pasture has a ghost and you can see it in the park, in the sense of any park. Often I am permitted to return, and in returning, through such wondrous appalling torrential repetition, the place starts to look less homey. *Locus suspectus*, old haunts. Search for images and you will get back so many images of this fucking park. The one in which the evening light was exceptional. The one in which the lighting was okay but that filter, damn. The one with a kiss in it. All the ones with kissing and pecking and tonguing, near desperate to turn sculpture's injunction into a caption, to generate rather than be generated by the red red decree. Does it matter if those depicted do not happen to be us? Or if the park is not the same park, revamped as it periodically is?

What pasture is this, what mirror country does it enfold? Call it Cartesia, map of the world the size of the world. x and y and z and r and g and b. I've been watching Harun Farocki's video essays about computer graphics, which are, like much of his work, both tranquil and unnerving. The hero has no parents and no teachers, says the voice over in one of them, from a series about video games. The hero appears in their thrownness. In this scene, it's as if we set the controller down and watch the hero on the screen uncompelled, both observed and unobserved. The hero bobs generically, patiently. The uncanny is slippery, how it both hides and shows. Sure the automaton hides its robot heart and we are fooled and it feels weird. A point for Turing. That is how I think of it. But also the automaton shows too much, reminds us too well of our automatic parts, all bone mechanics and chemical freight. The automaton flaunts a kind of reproducibility, seems almost inevitable. How home-like the reproduction, how uneasy our place in the scene. Games with bigger budgets might include more naturalistic waiting. Shoulders move with the breath, weight shifts from

foot to foot. Through the video we cycle through several such games. Like a camera still rolling after an interview, trained on its object long past when we stopped asking questions. The object of our attention squirms or winks awkwardly or looks away or into their hands.

The City Controller compiled a report in 2004. The mayor had just refused an offer of one million dollars from a shoe company for upkeep of what is municipally JFK Plaza, colloquially Love Park. The deal would have included access to the park by skateboard. Instead, the city spent nearly as much erecting obstacles to such access. And yet even without access, skateboards continued to describe the park as they had for years, meticulously measuring every surface and gap. The rolling concrete sound of this competing representation, one in which the very technical accomplishments of young men in loose athletic stances through several eras of jeans styles, captured in infinite short videos infinitely shareable, was not enough or was too much. The report designated JFK Plaza as one of six Potential Future Marketing Avenues. Such a plaza, central and visible and civic, is necessarily half there, potentially futural, subject to a reduction in opacity. It is a made place.

In this architectural rendering no one is alone. Some people are alone but they are engaged with their phones. Also that one woman in athletic capris jogging toward us, she is alone. Everyone else is shepherded around the space in pairs that are meticulously raced and classed, accompanying each other less as companions than as companionable minders tailing their charges. There is an inordinate amount of balloon-holding and tiny-dog walking. No one is on a skateboard. *LOVE* is solid on its plinth, vivid as the wash of mid-summer flowers. The park-goers in the distance are equally solid, certain, even if their footfalls may not

sit flush with the surface of the city, the computer-aided plane of the park. Close up however, we see they are vapors. A mouse has selected the element and on the spectrum of opacity, gone with less. Through this woman's crisp pencil skirt, we see the contrast where shades of pavement meet. Through the logo on a man's t-shirt, we see textures of brickwork and lawn. Behind which we might make out the motion of skateboards and circulating videos and disaffected youth swarming in advance of the creative class. Who brought life to the park some would write. And behind that, what apparently comes before life. As if in prying up the CGI tiles we might see the "dead space," "the urban black hole" that precedes us, which in this case while empty of capital was in fact crowded, the Philadelphians Reaganomically untethered from the few subsidized systems that had before kept them from floating away, who stand up at intervals to gesticulate or vocalize, then sit or lie back down.

I do not know this place but somewhere my body does, the x-y-z coordinates are a warm swell of familiarity. It dawns on me and I don't know what to think. The fact of it both fascinating and kind of stupid. There is another sculpture, also four-lettered, very red, the four-legged plinth just as chrome, but the letters don't spell anything: *THPS*. Tony Hawk Pro Skater. Pro Skater 2, I believe. A period of time I had more or less forgotten, it was the summer after I dropped out of college and I was entirely without direction. Holed up at my parent's house, I had a job at a chain coffee shop but was otherwise hemorrhaging my evenings onto this particular video game, directing an avatar and the camera that follows to interact with every playable surface in an arrangement made to resemble the set before me. An activity that was intensely solitary but shared widely enough that the game's colossal sales generated advocates





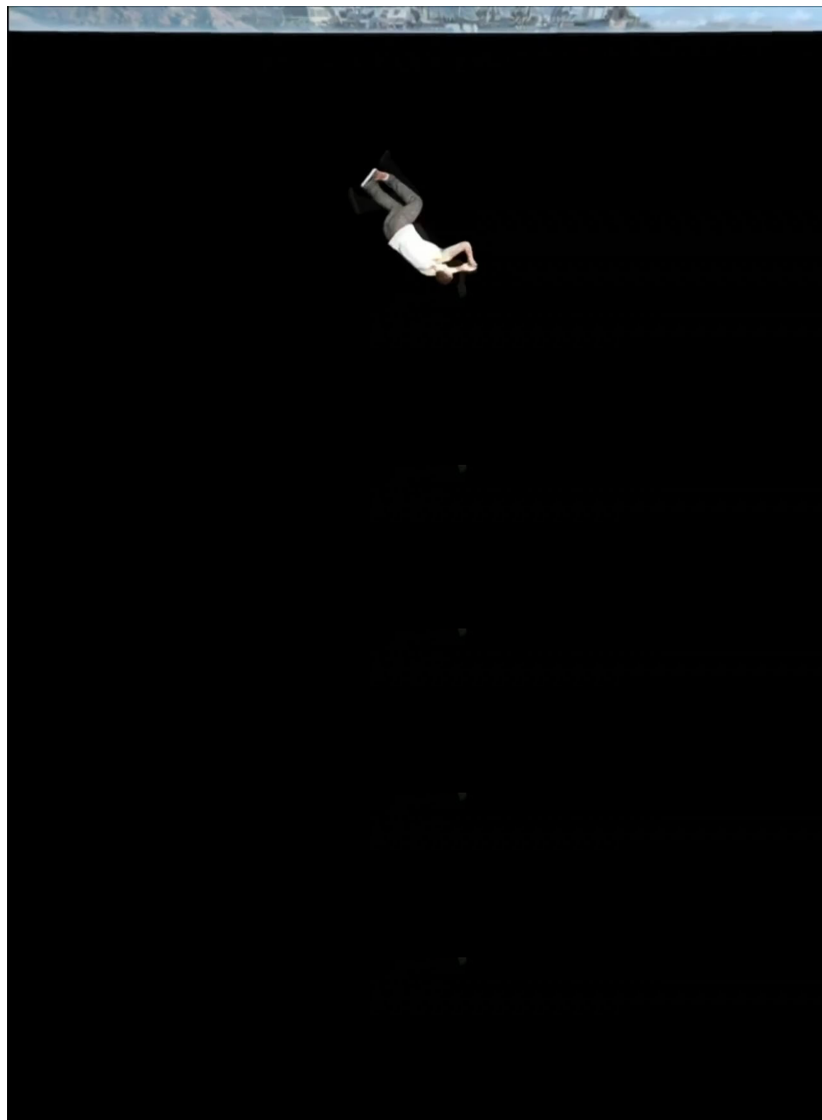
for the space in front of me, so much so that ESPN's X Games, which could take place anywhere on Earth, landed on Center City, on Love Park. What I remember is a game of baroque repetition, covering and recovering the same limited terrain in an effort towards completeness. I grew a sense for the place, to instrumentalize every feature, a precognitive blur of twitchy hand movements across the controller as the sun fell lower. In no way was I in Philadelphia, someone with credit and a valid billing address, but neither was I hiding out in a suburban living room, a young disappointment keenly observed by my parents, pouring myself into the screen so as to be unobservable.

In another of Farocki's videos, he focuses on the edges, the boundaries and bubbles that never come into view protecting the hero from getting beyond the playable area. We must be protected from any vantage from which the image might show as incoherent. Like this foliage, lovingly rendered from this one angle but distressingly transparent were the camera to inadvertently get lodged behind. Or this stone block, a solid that needs to remain so. Were the camera permitted to slip through we would see how objects in this world have no interiors.

Or the part of the map that was never populated. In the video, we cycle through characters: Soldier engaged in contemporary asymmetrical warfare, cowboy yet to choose between sheriff or outlaw, hardboiled detective between cases. Finally the camera arrives behind a young man of similar stature and affect as the others, in this incarnation dressed as a turn-of-the-millennium skater. We are told certain fail-safes have been disabled, our access expanded, and it is hard not to picture the gravity of Farocki, the serious German in his last years, fumbling over an elaborate

cheat code. We can see the scene now for its material, of bounded planes without thickness, a landscape cracking off at the edges. The skater does an impossible trick off an undetermined urban structure from a great height, but does not return with the gravity of the game engine. The hero continues to fall. The top half of the screen widens with a generic urban skyline lit by summer sun, dulled by haze. The lower half is assigned to black. The hero is spinning now, makes the gestures of falling but without orientation, without interaction, haunting untoward coordinates.





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## Bio Note

Nabil Kashyap is the author of *The Obvious Earth*, a collection of essays on travel. His poetry, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Actually People Quarterly*, *Colorado Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Full Stop*, *Seneca Review*, *Versal*, and elsewhere. He is a librarian at Swarthmore College and lives in Philadelphia.

